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ABSTRACT

Many corporations use the 360-degree feedback process to evaluate colleagues. This feedback process attempts to improve organizational performance by increasing the range of data included in employee appraisal. If well executed, it can accurately assess performance in strategically important competencies, establish accountability for documented outcomes, and foster employee development. As the 360-degree feedback process becomes more common, organizations adopting it have chosen different methods of using feedback data. Data suggest that multirater systems are used most frequently in the corporate environment to enhance personal development and growth. For athletic departments whose structure and philosophy are consistent with the purpose of a 360-degree multirater system, 13 guidelines are important (e.g., 360-degree feedback systems should be part of the district's strategic effort, the ideal way to put this system in place is to start from the top down, utilize feedback carefully, and make mentoring an essential component of the process). Whether an athletic department is an appropriate fit for a multirater appraisal system can be determined through open communication and discussion regarding the district/school environment, including the amount of bureaucratic control, level of collegiality among coaches and administrators, and task interdependence needed to achieve organizational goals and objectives. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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Evaluating colleagues has long been a dreaded part of administrative responsibilities. Not only is assessment of personnel a time consuming process, but it is often emotionally draining and fraught with fear of litigation and uncertain effects. In recognition of the importance of human capital, corporations are spending billions of dollars to enhance employee performance, including the use of 360-degree feedback tools. Designed to provide accurate feedback, communication of the critical behaviors for success, and direction for individualized development planning (Morical, 1999), the result of 360-degree appraisals is reflected in a positive change in organizational culture, and increased employee satisfaction and retention.

Performance appraisals that are used for administrative functions (promotions, pay increases, dismissal), feedback and development (providing the employee with guidelines for improvement), or legal protection (documenting patterns of poor performance) usually take the traditional form of supervisor – employee interaction exclusively. In contrast to previous evaluation composition, the 360-degree appraisal system utilizes data collected from individuals with whom the employee interacts; both vertically and horizontally, as well as data collected from a self-evaluation (See Figure 1). This data is then compiled and summarized in a report for the supervisor. In most cases raters remain anonymous (Antonioni, 2000).

Although procedures vary, typically the individual is rated by others who interact frequently with the individual, who are knowledgeable about the individual's performance, and whose opinions are valued by the individual (Bookman, 1999; Mount et al, 1998). The most common procedure is to include peers, subordinates, and bosses (in addition to self-ratings), but raters outside the organization such as customers and suppliers are frequently included (Wells, 1999; McCarthy, 2000). Despite other raters, the manager/administrator continues to play an important role in interpreting the feedback and shaping employee development (Jackson & Grellar, 1998). 360-degree feedback is not a system without managers, but one in which the manager's contribution impacts a wider range of components of the system than it would in a traditional appraisal.

Multisource appraisal became popular in the corporate environment in the late 1980's, for use primarily as an executive-development tool. Today it has been introduced into most Fortune 1000 companies, and continues to spread among smaller businesses. Many corporate managers view 360-degree feedback as a welcome solution to the problems that plague traditional performance appraisal, in which the employee is rated by the boss alone, by expanding the information available (Dyer, 2001; Coates, 1998). Jackson et al (1998) stated, "We have become accustomed to discussing 'feedback' as if it were a unitary, self-contained process. This oversimplification allows for some of the frustration and negative surprises associated with both feedback and appraisal (p. 19)." As a feedback system, the underlying logic behind the 360-degree approach is that there are many sources of feedback for employee appraisal that are available to both managers and employees. Because job performance is multidimensional, raters other than the

immediate supervisor may be better suited to evaluating certain aspects of performance. This shift from the predictable one-rater assessment to a multi-rater, 360-degree approach to personnel evaluation reflects an increasing emphasis on participative leadership, employee empowerment, team and competency-based rewards, customer service, and a focus on quality in today's corporate environment.

360-Degree Advantages and Disadvantages

360-degree feedback, if well executed can accurately assess performance in strategically important competencies, establish accountability for documented outcomes, and foster employee development (Huet-Cox et al, 1999). Rarely do employers receive specific, constructive feedback that enables them to determine whether they are behaving in ways that are consistent with management intentions or expectations. 360-degree feedback, also known as multirater or collateral feedback , allows employees to compare their own views of themselves with appraisal comments provided by others. This additional and specific sets the stage for open and frequent dialogue between manager and employee, encourages accountability among peers, contributes to self-insight, and leads to the enhancement of managerial proficiency and leadership skills. Additionally, many workplace skills and activities are difficult to measure. Athletic Directors at all size schools would agree that it is consistently difficult to measure interpersonal dimensions such as communication, team interaction, leadership, "customer service", presentation, instruction, etc. Since multisource feedback uses ratings from a variety of sources, it may prove more efficient, accurate, and objective evaluations of these areas.

For several years, corporate professionals hoped that 360-degree instruments would solve the problems of performance appraisal, but limitations and malfunctions

specific to multirater assessment have been recognized as well (Nowack et al, 1999; McCarthy, 2000). An overly complicated system can be as ineffective as a generic system One criticism of the 360-degree appraisal system is that it burdens managers with extra duties that include the construction of separate evaluation tools for each rater group, additional paperwork, and the compulsory assemblage and reporting of data.

Decisions as to who will be selected to serve as a rater, as well as time limitations, the energy and commitment necessary for communication and implementation, and uncertainty as to what to do with the feedback received, are additional concerns (Goodge & Watts, 2000; Wells, 1999; Meade, 1999; Morical, 1999). Recent data has also shown that multirater systems often create a new set of appraisal problems, including "improper rater selection, overrating and underrating biases, resistance from peers to be rated or rate others, and a tendency for organizations that rely on 360-degree instruments to neglect ongoing development as a part of the performance appraisal process (Bookman, 1999, p. 74)"

Although most of these weaknesses can be minimized over time, the following comment was noted in regards to the adoption of 360-degree appraisal systems in corporations: "In today's rush to adopt 360-degree programs, experts caution that some companies may put together hastily and poorly conceived efforts, which can sour employees on the peer review and feedback process—and render the whole exercise futile (Wells, 1999, p.82)." There are many types of appraisal processes. It's important to select one that fits with your culture and infrastructure.

For What Purpose?

As 360-degree feedback processes become more common, organizations adopting this practice have chosen different methods in which to use feedback data. The most significant decision is whether to use the feedback results for the purpose of development or evaluation. When the objective is developmental, feedback tends to be confidential, and individuals are expected to demonstrate behavioral improvements based on the feedback they receive. When the objective is evaluative (or solely for administrative purposes), access to the feedback is not limited to the employee being evaluated, and is frequently used in the annual performance review and for making decisions regarding pay increases. Data suggests that multirater systems are used most frequently in the corporate environment to enhance personal development and growth, rather than to support salary administration, promotions, or other administrative decisions (Mount et al, 1998). There seems to be little disagreement as to the appropriateness of 360-degree feedback for the purpose of development. The bulk of the documented problems appear when 360-degree appraisal is used for administrative purposes – when the organization is allowed to take consequential action based on rater comments.

Both data uses have pros and cons. Some believe that confidential 360-degree feedback data does not provide enough incentive for making improvements, and argue that refusing to consider 360-degree ratings in annual performance appraisals means compromising the evaluation process. However, experience among corporations who have adopted a multi-rater evaluation system has shown that linking 360-degree feedback data to pay and personnel decisions can undermine trust in the whole 360 degree process, and introduce unacceptable biases into appraisals (Coates, 1998). Others agreed that rater

comments become less honest and specific when that data may put someone's career or compensation in jeopardy (Nowak et al, 1999; Wells, 1999). The solution according to Antonioni (2000) may be to combine the benefits of both approaches by using two separate rating procedures: (1) mid-point ratings that would provide "feed-forward" (developmental) data – confidential comments used only for the purpose of improvement and goal setting, and (2) a final assessment, whose rater comments would be used as "feed-back" data that would be used in the annual performance appraisal.

360-Degree Guidelines

As with any appraisal system, certain guidelines should be followed prior to, and during implementation for maximum results. For athletic departments whose structure and philosophy are consistent with the purpose of a 360-degree multirater system, the following guidelines are provided:

1. 360-degree feedback systems should not stand alone but should be part of your school district's strategic effort. When any project is not linked to organizational strategy it is usually seen as "nice, but not necessary".

2. The ideal way to put a 360-degree system in place is to start from the top down—before any employee is reviewed under a 360-degree program, Athletic Directors and building administrators should be rated first. This strategy provides managers with first hand experience with the new system, and allows for self-assessment on their part. Goodge & Watts (2000) suggested, "If poor management is the reason for the difference between good and poor performers, then it is the managers who need 360-degree feedback, not their staff (p. 50)."

3. Determine the purpose of the feedback data prior to implementation and provide documentation towards this end (developmental or administrative). Using rater data for purposes other than those stated can undermine trust, and set the stage for litigation.

4. Decide ahead of time who "owns" the data. Will rater feedback be confidential and reported anonymously (data owned by the individual), or will appraisal comments be owned by the district/school and used for administrative purposes as they see fit? Confidentiality (and the perception of confidentiality) are essential if you desire accurate and honest data from the 360-degree process. It is suggested that the most effective way to protect confidentiality is to limit the feedback available to the boss of the person being rated (Coates, 1998). Managers don't need access to all of an individual's feedback data in order to carry out their responsibilities as mentors. Summarizing comments into one general paragraph for each rater group by an outside party should assist in this process Whenever possible, use multiple raters from each category.

5. Educate those involved about common rater errors such as rating an individual based on their most recent performance, giving higher ratings to individuals whose work style is similar to yours, or transferring the success of an unrelated activity to the evaluation issue at hand (Atwater, et al, 1998; Mount et al, 1998).

6. Start with one area of the athletic department (one or two willing coach), and use this experience as a pilot program for future implementation expansion.

7. Feedback should be utilized carefully. Feedback is data, and data is neutral. Although data are factual information regarding observed actions or consequences, data cannot make decisions about personnel. The Athletic Director must still judge the

meaning or value of the data collected. Consequently, it is essential to keep in mind that feedback should not be accepted too easily or rejected too quickly.

8. Consider using a formative (midpoint) 360-degree system for developmental purposes only, and retaining your existing evaluation method for summative (administrative) purposes.

9. A distinction must be made between measures of behavior and measures of outcome prior to implementation of a 360-degree feedback system. Focusing entirely on a coach's behavior or traits means ignoring the work results they produce. In theory, leadership behaviors should have a strong association with positive work results. On the other hand, rewarding only results may overlook the methods used to achieve those results.

10. Remember that rater feedback can be quite varied. The purpose of 360-degree feedback is not to increase validity by soliciting like-minded views; rather the intent is to capture the range of differing information that bears on the individual's performance (Jackson & Grellar, 1998). Hearing the same message from several sources can affect powerful leverage for change. However, inconsistency among sources may make it difficult for an employee to know where to focus their future actions, and result in confusion and increased litigation over inequitable treatment or wrongful discharge.

11. Mentoring is an essential component of the 360-degree process. The primary focus of 360-degree appraisals systems is in the *utilization*, rather than the collection of data. For feedback to bring about change, decisions must be made regarding subsequent action. For feedback to work well, it must be understood and accepted by both the coach and the Athletic Director. Corporate employees suggested that the most useful part of

their 360-degree experience was the face-to-face conversations they had with their managers following the collection of data (Storr, 2000).

12. How feedback is delivered often has a lot to do with how it's received. Be specific when discussing how coaches might learn from information gleaned during 360-degree reviews, and allow the coach to view the feedback data prior to discussion.

13. If 360-degree appraisal becomes the standard method of personnel assessment, consider the purchase of a pre-packaged, automated, electronically encrypted 360-degree assessment tool (Meade, 1999), or have your raters respond to appraisal questionnaires via e-mail or by logging onto a link to your organization's web page (Huet-Cox et al, 1999). Using the internet as a vehicle for collecting 360-degree feedback offers a faster, more convenient alternative to the traditional paper & pencil questionnaire.

Summary

The 360-degree feedback process can be a powerful tool, but only if used wisely and judiciously. Some corporations have conveyed frustration with the 360-degree appraisal system primarily due to a poor fit between the feedback system and the organization itself. Whether your athletic department is an appropriate "fit" for a multi-rater appraisal system can be determined through open communication and discussion regarding your district/school environment, including the amount of bureaucratic control, the level of collegiality among coaches and administrators, and the task interdependence necessary to achieve the goals and objectives of your organization (Some propose that there is little reason to gather appraisal data from other employees if everyone is working independently). There must be "philosophic consistency" between your organization and

any feedback system you choose. Forcing participation under any other circumstances is a quick route to failure.

360-degree feedback is an attempt to improve organizational performance by increasing the range of data included in employee appraisal. The experience of our corporate colleagues suggests that 360-degree appraisal reinforces a culture of empowerment, fosters improved communication, provides a three-dimensional perspective on employee performance, and improves relations with internal and external customers. Performance issues that had previously been swept under the rug are confronted and improved performance is the result.

360-degree feedback has been eagerly embraced by the corporate community for its ability to hold managers accountable for developing, inspiring, and empowering the people who produce their product. Educational institutions (and interscholastic athletic departments specifically), may also be able to derive benefit from this practice. Although all aspects of 360-degree appraisal may not be appropriate for interscholastic sport, there are portions of this corporate strategy that could be utilized to improve existing evaluation procedures in sport. It is important to remember however, that any method of performance appraisal is simply a tool. The tools themselves are effective only if leaders use good judgment when applying them.

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Figure 1: Traditional vs. 360-Degree Appraisal

Traditional Appraisal

360-Degree Appraisal